# Smoke Signals 1998 Film Essay

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Smoke Signals(1998), was a ground breaking film that came out in 1998. The film was created by Sherman Alexie, and directed by Chris Eyre. This film is a landmark film in Native American cinema. It was one of the first films written, directed and acted by Native Americans. In the beginning of the film it showed a drunk native american father named Arnold Joseph, he was at a 4th of July party at some house. In this scene he accidentally shot a roman candle firework into the window, the house went up in flames. After the father had realized that he had caught the house on fire, he went running in to rescue his son Victor and another boy named Thomas. There were some stereotypes that I saw in this film about native americans and it portrayed that native americans were alcoholics. The film also explores the realities of Native American life, Including traumas that happen in some native families.

The Main story of the film was about two young Coeur d'Alene Native American men named Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Who end up going on a journey to retrieve the ashes of Victor's father, Arnold Joseph. It had childhood traumas and historical traumas that native americans have been through or faced in the time of the 90s, particularly the trauma caused by colonialism, displacement, and family violence.

In this film Arnold Joseph plays a character that is an alcoholic who abandoned his family, a reflection of the intergenerational effects of historical trauma. Historical trauma refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences. Arnold Joseph's alcoholism and abusive behavior are symptomatic of this trauma, which is not unique to him but emblematic of many Native American families grappling with the consequences of colonization and cultural disruption.

Historically, Native Americans have been portrayed as either noble savages or as caricatures, most often stripped of individuality and complexity. The film presented characters with diverse personalities and flaws. The character Thomas Builds-The-Fire is the story teller and culture keeper which totally counters the stereotype of the silent or mean looking Native American by being talkative, humorous, and self aware. While the other character Victor Joseph struggles with anger and resentment, reflecting the emotional struggles faced by so many of Native Americans in real life.

As I dig more into the (1998) film Smoke Signals, it also had the theme of healing and reconciliation. In the journey that Victor and Thomas took to retrieve Arnold's ashes, it was not only physical but also healing, spiritual and emotional. Throughout the film it explores and presents overcoming trauma and reclaiming identity. What I mean by that is for example in the scene where Victor and Thomas make it to Phoenix, Arizona. They meet a young Native American woman named Suzy Song, She lived in a trailer out in the middle of nowhere. She seemed like a nice woman, somewhat tough and straight forward. After she invited Victor and Thomas in for a good meal and good night's rest, Suzy Song showed a softer side of her when she talked about Arnold Joseph. The encounter she had with Victor outside while he was shooting the basketball around was a mix of emotion and humor, while also revealing more about Victor's fathers complicated life and helping his son Victor come to terms with his feelings about his father. The next morning Victor got Thomas up and they left before daylight back to Coeur d'Alene, on their journey back they faced another traumatic event. They end up finding a white couple, the man was drunk and they had some kind of accident in their vehicle. Victor runs for help and a lot of his emotions seem to help him deal with his traumas and heal from some of

his traumas. Eventually he wakes up in the hospital and gets questioned by the law right away. They ended up having someone give a statement that cleared the boys Victor and Thomas from being the cause of the incident. The end of the movie shows forgiveness, brotherhood, acceptance and family.

# References

Chris, E. (Director), (1998). Smoke Signals [Film].